

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

TESTIMONY OF

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Before the

Subcommittee On Forests and Forest Health

Committee On Resources

United States House of Representatives

Concerning

Public and Private Resource Management and Protection Issues on our National Forests

May 18, 1999

Madam Chairman and members of the subcommittee, my name is Bill Wasley, and I am the Director of the Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations program. I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss Forest Service law enforcement.

Key elements of the Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations (LE&I) program are:

1. protecting and serving the public and our employees;
2. protecting natural resources and other property under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service;
and
3. cooperating with other law enforcement agencies.

We accomplish these key goals by applying the common sense crime prevention elements of

education, engineering, and enforcement.

I appeared before this Subcommittee on June 23, 1998, to discuss the Forest Service LE&I program and structure, authorities, cooperation with State, local, and other Federal agencies, and the unique and special challenges facing our program. As follow-up to the hearing we also provided information and documents to the House Resources Committee on various law enforcement matters, and the reorganization of LE&I within the Forest Service.

I will briefly discuss each of the key elements of the LE&I program.

PROTECTING AND SERVING THE PUBLIC AND OUR EMPLOYEES

Protection of visitors and users of the National Forests and Forest Service employees in the performance of their duties is the primary mission of law enforcement and investigation.

Crime is increasing, at least on some national forests, and LE&I has responded to the increasing work load in apprehending criminals and acting on criminal activity within the confines of current staffing and cooperative support. Security is important to the public. Criminal activities such as personal assault, gang activity and theft of property negatively impact visitor experiences. Vandalism and theft at recreation facilities decrease public enjoyment and divert limited recreation dollars.

PROTECTING NATURAL RESOURCES

Law enforcement personnel also operate as full partners within the Forest Service in carrying out the Forest Service mission. LE&I provides protection for natural resources, including timber, water, soils, special forest products, and archaeological sites. Resource damage from arson and human-caused fires can be substantial. Unauthorized use of the national forests can damage natural resources and property and cause irreversible impacts.

Timber theft remains a top priority of the Forest Service LE&I staff. In 1998, there were over 35 cases dealing with timber theft. The LE&I staff coordinates closely with the Forest Management staff on all timber theft cases involving timber sale contracts.

Illicit drug labs and marijuana cultivation on national forest lands continue to be a major concern, with adverse effects on natural resources and on public and employee safety. Toxic chemicals used in illicit labs and marijuana gardens leach into soil and waterways causing negative impacts to vegetation, wildlife, and drinking water. Working cooperatively with our state and local law enforcement partners, the Forest Service eradicated over 330,000 marijuana plants last year and found 105 meth-amphetamine labs and lab dumps on National Forest System lands, an increase from 1997 totals. Officers made over 2,800 arrests and seized over

\$4.8 million dollars in assets.

COOPERATION WITH OUR PARTNERS

Each year increases in public use of National Forest System lands cause increases in crimes against people and resources. Other federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies are similarly faced with increasing crime trends that tax their abilities to accomplish their work with limited resources.

The Cooperative Law Enforcement Act authorizes the Forest Service to reimburse local law enforcement agencies for expenses associated with law enforcement services on National Forest System lands. In 1998, the Forest Service maintained 530 cooperative agreements with State and local agencies for performance of routine law enforcement patrol activities, and 163 drug enforcement cooperative agreements. Over \$6 million dollars were provided through these agreements to local law enforcement agencies. We are currently developing a standardized cooperative agreement to be used nationwide. Upon implementation, we will assess the level of funding provided to each cooperator to cover their extraordinary expenses incurred while working on National Forest System lands.

The Senate Appropriations Committee report for the fiscal year 1999 Department of Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act directed the Forest Service to evaluate the comparative costs of Forest Service uniformed law enforcement officers to those of county enforcement officials and other uniformed Federal natural resource oriented law enforcement officers. As part of this evaluation, an analysis will be conducted regarding the ability of local enforcement officials to enforce Federal statutes, give priority to such statutes within the constraints of local priorities, attain Federal training standards, prevent increased liability under the Federal Tort Claims Act, and retain independence from external influence. Initial findings should be completed by the end of May, 1999. In addition, we will be conducting a random survey of county sheriffs to assess their ability to undertake this activity. We expect those results back this summer.

SUMMARY

In summary, with the expectation that we will have one billion visitor-days on our national forests this year, the law enforcement and investigations program is critical to protecting and serving the public and our employees, protecting natural resources and other property under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service, and cooperating with other law enforcement agencies. The job is immense, and we are working hard at providing these services with the resources we have available to do the job.

Thank you Madam Chairman and members of the subcommittee for allowing me the opportunity to speak before you today. I am ready to answer any questions you may have.

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